

LGBT associations are getting closer to Polish trade unions

in Warsaw from October 2nd to 4th, 2008

Representatives of Polish trade union associations OPZZ and Solidarność, as well as of the Polish Teachers' Union (ZNP) met on 4th October, 2008 in Warsaw with associations who stand up for lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transgender people. The Warsaw office of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation organized expert meetings with representatives of LGBT-associations, such as the Campaign Against Homophobia (KPH), Lambda, Trans-Fuzja and with trade unions from Poland, England (UNISON), France and Canada (PSI), Germany (GEW, ver.di) and the Netherlands (AbvaKabo). Kalina Grzelak – an expert from ZNP on equality and anti-discrimination – is planning to establish a committee for equality in her trade union before the summer of 2009. In 2009, there is also a plan of organizing a seminar on equality with the support of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation.

As early as in 2005 and 2006, the ZNP fought against the then minister of national education – Roman Giertych (League of Polish Families, LPR), who was hostile to homosexuals and who wanted to dismiss all gay and lesbian teachers from schools. For him the fact of not concealing one's homosexual orientation boiled down to a "homosexual propaganda".

"Working against discrimination unites us", said Jolanta Gałczyńska – the head of the office of the ZNP board, a psychologist and an adviser of many years' standing – to the representatives of LGBT associations.

For Solidarność and OPZZ, the subject-matter concerning LGBT people is a completely unknown territory. "We have our own priorities: workplaces, wages etc. Besides, so far, our legal department has not been informed about any case concerning sexual discrimination", says Paweł Śmigielski, a lawyer in OPZZ. "We cannot carry out surveys in companies" – explains Piotr Ostrowski, who is responsible for international co-operation in OPZZ. However, in the meeting, a reference was made to the fact that Wiesława Taranowska – Deputy President of the OPZZ – deals with issues concerning women and acting against discrimination.

"Michiel Odijk from ABVAKABO, who has been working for about 20 years in his union on LGBT issues, told the Polish unionists that they don't have to start from scratch and can use foreign examples. "Of course not by just importing them. I know the Polish circumstances are different from the Dutch, or the German, or the British. But as far as I am concerned, use our experience as examples, as inspiration.""

Svend Robinson, who as the first deputy to the Canadian House of Commons openly revealed his homosexual orientation and who now works for the Public Services International (PSI, which

associates 20 million employees), encouraged Polish trade unions to more openness. In trade union structures, there should exist special departments or contact people to whom members – belonging to sexual minorities – could turn. Colin de la Motte-Sherman – an activist of ver.di and Amnesty International – advised Polish trade unions not to go like a bull at a gate as far as the issue of LGBT people is concerned, but rather to include them in campaigns for human rights and tolerance. Ulf Höpfner, who together with his colleague teachers Guido Mayus and Frank Pohl has taken part in the Equality Parade in Warsaw, stressed that sexual education in schools hardly conveyed information about sexual relations. Most important is the development of social competence and understanding of plurality of lifestyles. Besides, it also helps to develop one's own individual acting competence, sexual self-determination and it serves as a form of violence-prevention and health education which should be found in the majority of school subjects.

On 3rd October 2008 in the Polish Ministry of Labour and Social Policy, foreign unionists and the representatives of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation met with the Director of the Department of Women, Family and Counteracting Discrimination – Berenika Anders and her co-workers Monika Ksieniewicz and Agata Niebój. The department published brochures containing contact data for women in Polish and English. The issue LGBT was taken into consideration in 2007 – “the European Year For Diversity, against Discrimination”. The deputy minister is open towards this subject and the department receives great support from the EU and the EQUAL Community Initiative. Since 2006, only five complaints have been submitted to the Ministry, most of them dealt with sexual harassment and mobbing.

The Polish Ombudsman (since February 15th, 2006) dr. Janusz Kochanowski (with 250 employees of his office), underlined in front of the foreign trade unions his interest and actions against discrimination (dismissal of the director of the National In-Service Teacher Training Center due to the publication of “Compass”, discrimination of homosexual blood donors, describing homosexuals as perverts and mentally retarded in a publication of the Christian Culture Association “Piotr Skarga”, insulting the participants of the Equality Parade by calling them “disgusting perverts” by the Minister of National Education). Dr. Kochanowski meets every half a year with the Campaign Against Homophobia. He doesn't want to organize actions on the LGBT-topics by himself, because there are other important matters to be dealt with. Important to him are for instance the social care of Polish migrants (2 Mio since 2004) in Western Europe. Carola Towle from London, a contact person for LGBT-persons for the trade union UNISON, informed, that the numbers of LGBT-persons among migrants is much higher than in Poland, which means, that many people are leaving their countries to live in more tolerant ones.

The Ombudsman, a lawyer of the Helsinki Foundation Maciej Bernatt, as well as Agnieszka Gór-ska and Krzysztof Kliszczyński from Lambda-Association regret that there are no court judgments on LGBT-discrimination. Many persons just don't have the courage to go to court, they claim. Maciej Bernatt described an exception. A homosexual employee of a shopping centre in Plock was first persecuted and then dismissed because of his orientation. The lawsuit finished with a defeat, because of a incompetent lawyer, not paid 20 zloty for the appeal against the ruling and due to the lack of witnesses, as they didn't want to testify, because the employer warned them of the consequences. Homosexual couples are being discriminated when it comes to housing co-operative law, joint tax return declarations or adoption of children. But even when the plaintiff manages to establish his rights through all instances, the court will not rule in his or her favor, because of the constitution, which doesn't allow homosexual marriages or equal rights for homo-couples.

The meetings, initiated by ver.di representative Bodo Busch, began on October 2nd, 2008 with KPH, Lambda and other organizations connected with the Equality Parade. The consultations with the Polish trade unions were held by the foreign trade unions and representatives of the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (Clemens Rode, Krzysztof Getka) on Unity Day, a German national holiday. On the next day there was workshop, which was joint by representatives of such LGBT organizations as KPH and Trans-Fuzja.

"Today's' young people are much more open and tolerant than the elder generation", said trade union activist Kalina Grzelak. All participants agreed to work on complaints on basis of discrimination of LGBT-people and to support them legally and with organizational means.

Achim Baatzsch for the Friedrich Ebert Foundation, October 7th, 2008